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Augmented Reality and the Quest for Realism

While augmented reality requires a base of “reality” to “augment,” making the augmentations too realistic kind of defeats the purpose of having augmentations. It is not the augmentation nor the real object that makes “augmented reality” particularly significant, but rather the interaction between the two. On their own, reality has its own space and feeling and digital media has its own space and feeling. When put together, those worlds collide, creating an all-new feeling. Is it a digital world imposed on a real world, or a real world imposed inside of a digital one?

The author of the article that references Manovich’s original article describes a trade off in the interaction between computer generated images and reality: while the computer generated images do not quite reach the photorealism of real objects and places, they are made more real by being placed into reality. While the use of actual, physical props would make the augmentations more realistic, there is a distinction in how we interpret them, and a limit on how abstract real objects can get. Computer-generated imagery essentially has little to no limit on how abstract or unreal it can get. The presence of a digital object in a real world makes the object seems more realistic. Does the presence of a real object in a digital world make the object seem less real, or does the digital world look more realistic?

Augmented reality does not require technology or computers either; it is the blending of multiple forms of media to make a sort of collage that brings new meanings to each component. This concept has been around for a long time; only now there are more applications for it with the opportunities presented by new technology. Digitally generated images are just a new form of media that has a very wide range of variation. The use of animation and moving pictures imposed on real objects is a newer example I can think of that may not have been possible earlier. Adding the quality of motion to stationary object adds a sense of “life” to it; one particular example being footage of a human face making expressions projected on a rock, making the rock resemble a head.

Is augmented reality limited to visual representation, or can it be extended to the other senses? After all, we perceive the world with more than just our vision; there is smell, taste, hearing, and touch. Sound in particular can drastically change a scene with the use of foley (sound effects/cues) or a musical soundtrack. Reality does not naturally have those sound effects or a musical soundtrack, but plays and cinema use them almost seamlessly as augmentations. A sad scene with the appropriate music would be perceived as completely natural, as the visual scene matches up with the meaning of the auditory sense. Both can have meaning on their own, but together they create something new where they add to and build off of each other. The possibilities presented computers to produce digital sound effects is akin to the range of imagery: both are effectively limitless. The practice is not new, but opportunities are greater in this day and age.